DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 756 CS 202 612

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TITLE Beyond Phase Electives: English Programs in Optional Public Schools.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Secondary School English Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (3rd, Kansas City, Missouri, April 18-20, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Schools; *Educational Alternatives; Educational Philosophy; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Individualized Instruction; *Open Education; *Public Schools; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Optional alternative public schools have been developed as an expression of the democratic ideal of individual choice. Alternative systems offer the opportunity for individuated instruction, contact with the "real world" community, and community control of educational decision-making. However, reforms in the last few decades have encouraged standardization of public schools. Alternative systems can offer a greater range of flexibility and responsiveness to student and community differences. Open schools, schools without walls, learning centers, multi-cultural shcools, and free schools are among those possible alternative systems. English programs in alternative settings differ from those in public schools mainly in the individuated nature of instruction, which results in greater acceptance of individual diversity, more nurturing of creativity, more concern with the process of learning, and more attention to skill development. In the future, optional alternative schools will serve as a complement to the public system in the attempt to provide the best possible educational environment for every child. (KS)

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Vernon H. Smith

BEYOND PHASE ELECTIVES: ENGLISH PROGRAMS IN OPTIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The development of optional alternative public schools is based upon four simple concepts: (1) In a democratic society people should have choices about all important aspects of their lives. Our present monolithic structure for public education, in which children and youth are assigned without choice to a public school, evolved more by accident than by intent. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators should all have options among a plurality of schools. (2) Different people learn in different ways. This is all too obvious, but remember the psychology of learning is much newer than the organizational structure of the public schools. If we know that different people learn in different ways and at different times, what sense does it make to assign all the eight-year-olds in the neighborhood to one school and one classroom within that school? (3) Learning in schools should not be isolated from the world outside the school. Four national reports on secondary education published within the last two years are unanimous in their criticism of the schools for isolating youth from society and for segregating youth from adults and from other age groups in the schools. (4) Those closest to the action, the individual school, should have the biggest share in the decision making. The local community, the families involved, and the teachers and administrators should all have a share in decisions that affect their lives.

A Kaleidoscope of Reform Efforts

I have experienced over twenty years of rhetoric on crisis and reform in American education. So have some of you. The rhetoric has been interesting, boring, exciting, morbid, healthy, pathological, hopeful, discouraging,

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creative, stifling, but above all, ineffective in developing schools that are pleasant places for learning and teaching.

Any list of events that have affected, and are still affecting the schools and the teaching of English would have to include: The Supreme Court decision on Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954); the consolidation of school districts from over 100,000 at the end of World War II to about 15,000 today; The National Defense Education Act (1958); the development of team teaching and elective programs in English in the late 50's and early 60's; the development of advanced placement programs in English during this same period; the Conant report The American High School Today (1959), which urged the improvement of programs for the academically talented and suggested a minimum size for the effective high school; MLA's Basic Issues in the Teaching of English (1959); the Bruner report The Process of Education (1960), which was concerned with the structure of the disciplines; (English teachers never did agree on the structure of English, but by 1970, Bruner had changed his mind anyway.) the national curriculum projects of the 60's; (Remember the New Math? In 1974 Dr. Jerrold Zacharias, who was with Bruner at Woods Hole in 1959, said hopefully, "in three or four years we'll have the math mess cleaned up."[1] He was referring to the new math mess, of course.) the addition of English and reading to the NDEA (1964); the NDEA institutes for English teachers in the mid-sixties; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965); the establishment of the National Foundation for the Arts and the Humanities (1965); the Dartmouth Conference (1966); the performance-systems-accountability movement of the late 60's, including behavioral objectives, National Assessment, and the accompanying rhetoric and jargon, which were offensive to English teachers and other sensitive, intelligent people; the National Study of High School English

Programs (1968), (Jim Squire stated, "One of the disturbing discoveries of the National Study was that the lower tracks--indeed, programs for as many as the middle 50 percent of our pupils--have received little thoughtful attention. With so many schools encountering difficulties in translating programs for such students into action, it may be too much to expect fully successful curriculums for some years."[2])

Standardization vs. Diversification

One of the cumulative results of all these reform efforts was the increasing standardization of the public schools. Another was the growing acceptance of public education as a solution to some of our major social problems. Some people feel that these standardization efforts caused more problems than they solved. The development of smaller optional public schools is a movement to diversify schools and learning environments--a pluralistic educational system for a pluralistic society.

The alternative public school movement started with Philadelphia's Parkway Program in 1969. Parkway was probably the first secondary school designed to be available by option to every student in its community and designed to use the total community, the city of Philadelphia, as a learning environment. The optional public school caught on quickly. By 1975, five years after Parkway's inauguration, there were at least a dozen types of alternative public schools operating in several thousand communities and enrolling at least a million students, elementary and secondary.

What Types of Alternative Public Schools Are There?

Since alternative public schools usually develop as responses to particular educational needs within their communities, there is no single model or group of models that would encompass their diverse nature. However, the majority of alternative public schools would fit into the following

types or into combinations of these types.

Open Schools--with learning activities individualized and organized around interest centers within the classroom or building. While the concept of open education is not new, there has been a revival of interest in it beginning with the development of informal infant schools in Great Britain following World War II.

Schools Without Walls--with learning activities throughout the community and with much interaction between school and community. Philadelphia's Parkway Program, which opened in 1969, was the first and is probably the most well known of these.

Learning Centers--with a concentration of learning resources in one location available to all of the students in the community. This would include magnet schools, educational parks, career education centers, vocational and technical high schools, etc.

Continuation Schools--with provisions for students whose education in the conventional school has been (or might be) interrupted. This would include drop-out centers, re-entry programs, pregnancy-maternity centers, evening and adult high schools, street academies, etc.

Multi-Cultural Schools--with emphasis on cultural pluralism and ethnic and racial awareness and usually serving a multi-cultural student body. Bilingual schools with optional enrollment would be included here.

Free Schools--with emphasis on greater freedom for students and teachers. This term is usually applied to nonpublic alternative schools, but a few are available by choice within public school systems.

Fundamental Schools--with emphasis on the threee R's and a curriculum that emphasizes achievement in basic areas and skills. This term is also used for nonpublic schools, but in some communities public fundamental schools

have been established, usually at the request of parents. While their number is few, they exist in several states: California, Colorado, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Schools-Within-Schools--with a small number of students and teachers involved by choice in a different kind of learning program. This would include mini-schools and satellite schools. A satellite school is a school at another location which maintains administrative ties to the parent school. The schools-within-schools would usually belong to one or more of the six types above.

Not all alternative public schools would fall into these types. There is at least one optional alternative public school where all learning activities are based on behavior modification (Grand Rapids, Michigan) and at least one other that is a non-graded continuous progress school (Minneapolis, Minnesota).

In addition to the above, many alternative public schools operate as voluntary integration models within their communities.

What Are Their Common Characteristics?

While each alternative public school has been developed in response to specific needs within its community, most of these optional public schools have common characteristics:

1. As previously stated, the school provides an option for students, parents, and teachers. Usually the choice is open to all, but there must always be a choice for some so that the school has a voluntary clientele.

2. The school population reflects the ethnic, racial, and socio-economic makeup of the entire community.

3. The school has as its reason for existence a commitment to be more responsive to some perceived educational need than the conventional secondary schools.

4. The school usually has more comprehensive goals and objectives than its conventional counterpart. While alternative schools are concerned with developing basic skills and preparing students for college and vocations, they are also concerned with improving self-concepts; developing individual talent, creativity, and uniqueness; understanding and encouraging cultural plurality and diversity; and preparing students for various roles in society--consumer, voter, critic, parent, spouse, etc.

5. The school is more flexible, and therefore, more responsive to planned evolution and change. Since the alternatives are being developed in the age of accountability, they rely on feedback and formative evaluation in developing and modifying curricula and programs.

6. The school is usually smaller than the comprehensive secondary school. The median enrollment in alternative public schools is under 200.

7. Because they are smaller, alternatives tend to have fewer rules and fewer bureaucratic constraints on students and teachers.

8. The school provides students and teachers with opportunities to participate in decision-making on the school's program and their individual roles within the school. The result is both more choice and more responsibility for each individual.

Some alternative schools would not have all of these characteristics. Many conventional schools would have some of these characteristics. But in general, these characteristics indicate that the optional alternative secondary schools do differ in significant ways from their conventional counterparts. These differences are not nearly as significant as the total impact of the optional schools on the school system. Each optional school by being responsive to particular learning needs helps to create a total school system that is more responsive to the needs of its community. The ultimate goal within any community should be to provide every family with meaningful educational choices.

When the school district provides multiple options, as in Berkeley, Grand Rapids, and Minneapolis, the conventional school becomes one of the options and benefits by a clientele that comes by choice rather than be compulsion.

What Does This Have To Do With The Teaching Of English?

In 1956 I was involved in a team teaching program in high school English. The significant aspect of team teaching was that teachers had more choices and more to say about the schedule and the curriculum. They weren't locked into five classes per day, five days per week. Teachers felt better about that.

In 1958, I was involved in an electives program in English. Students were allowed to select mini-courses in English and had several electives per year instead of being forced into one course with one teacher. Students felt better about that. Teachers benefitted too. They found that they preferred a clientele that came by choice rather than compulsion. John Henry Martin, the chairman of the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education stated that the recent trend toward minicourses and semester electives is "the single most promising and effective development in the history of secondary education." I hope that he is wrong. There are many serious problems in secondary education and in society that mini-courses won't cure.

But even with team teaching and elective programs, many schools were still not pleasant places to spend 180 days per year. Check with Herndon, Holt, Kohl, Kozol, or Silberman. What makes a good school for students and teachers goes beyond what happens in English classrooms.

Some of you may have read Neil Postman's article on "The Ecology of Learning" in the April, 1974, English Journal.[3] Neil presented a seven point

proposal for improving schooling. Not one of Neil's seven points was related to the content of the English curriculum and only one was directly related to the English classroom.

In that same issue of the English Journal, Lois Josephs Fowler in her article "The Schools, The Teachers, and The English Classroom: Another Apocalypse," states that it isn't "possible to separate the teaching of English from the educational system as a whole."[4] She proposes abandoning compulsory education after sixth grade in favor of a variety of optional community centers for young adults.

The logical step from English by choice was to schools of choice, and that's why English teachers have been foremost in the move to optional public schools. I feel at home when I attend a conference on alternative public schools because it's usually a gathering of English teachers.

How Is English Different in Optional Public Schools?

My experience with English programs in conventional schools and with English programs in alternative schools does not indicate that there are major differences between the two. The differences are small, but I believe significant. The differences are probably more related to size of schools, the overall learning community of the schools, and the learning atmosphere within the schools than with the English classroom.

The only striking difference is in the individualization of instruction. In visits to alternative schools in all parts of the country, I have seen more individualized instruction--teachers working with individual students, students teaching students, students involved in individual projects, and students involved in action learning programs outside the school. Both students and teachers have more choices and therefore more responsibilities. The result is more work with individuals and small groups, less with classes.

The remaining items on this list may all be concomitant factors of this increased individualization.

a. More nurturing of individual talent and creativity.

b. More provisions for, and acceptance of, diversity in language and in culture.

c. More attention to basic skill development.

d. More attention to Jim Squire's group in the middle.

e. More concern with the process of learning than with the product or content of learning.

f. More concern with becoming (i.e. growth and development) than with performance and academic achievement. (More concern with long-range individual goals than with short-range behavioral objectives.)

The alternative school tends to be less isolated from its community, and the students are less isolated from other age groups. There is more interaction between the school and the community--kids and teachers moving out into the community for learning experiences; community people coming into the school or taking part in learning experiences outside. There is more concern with language outside the school--language in the real world, where the politics of language is considerably more important than the structure of language.

When considered as an organizational unit, the alternative schools provide a structure for the self-renewal and self-actualization of schools and faculties. We are already seeing the development of alternatives to the alternatives.

Overall these differences, even though they are relatively small at this time, provide more opportunities for the professional growth of English teachers, for the self-actualization of teachers and students, and for the development of more effective English programs for the future. Twenty years

of attempts to reform the conventional school have convinced me that it does not have this potential.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

The optional alternative public school seemes to be an educational "idea whose time had come." In 1971 Neil Postman wrote, "All of the reforms that will take place in education in the next decade will have their origins in the alternative school movement."[5] And in 1973, Mario Fantini said, "The development of public schools of choice is the only major movement in American education today."[6]

In 1973 The Fifth Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education reported almost two-thirds of the respondents favored alternative schools. Over 60% of the parents and adults with no children in the schools and 80% of the professional educators responding favored alternative schools.[7]

In 1974 after at least seven years of funding public and non-public alternative schools, the Ford Foundation produced a report on alternative schools with this final statement:

> The point has been made that alternatives are necessary and can work educationally. Whether they continue and multiply now depends more on school systems' own initiatives than on external assistance.[8]

And in 1974 the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools published standards for the approval of optional schools with these introductory paragraphs:

> In recent years the concept of educational choice (optional schools, alternative schools--call them what you will) has penetrated deeply into the American system of education. It seems likely that in the foreseeable future many different types of schools will exist side by side within the total educational structure, each designed to meet a different set

> of specified learning and living needs of young people. These schools will not be competitve with nor antagonistic to one another, but rather will be complementary in effort and thrust, helping American education redeem its long-term commitment to the fullest education of every child.
>
> While the standard school certainly will continue to be the major institution in American education, it will not be the exclusive one. Other types of schools will develop, seeking to provide more fully for the total educational needs of the community. Widespread educational options--the coexistence of many types of alternative schools and programs--should strengthen American education as a whole.[9]

I can't resist closing with this bizarre report from one of our students, a resident teacher in the Alternative Schools Teacher Education Program, describing a students in a school-within-a-school program.

> One student, a girl, had been overweight, unattractive, and apathetic to the extent that she would not even visit with relatives. Within a few months after coming to Blank High School, and her parents say as a direct result of this program, she lost 20 pounds, she began to take an interest in her appearance, she went out and got herself a job babysitting, and she made the honor roll; and her father told us that he had a new problem since boys were beginning to call for the first time.[10]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jerrold R. Zacharias, quoted in "World Progress Report" by Anthony Wolff, Saturday Review World, September 7, 1974, p. 8.

[2]James R. Squire, "Evaluating High School English Programs, " The North Central Association Quarterly, 40:3, Winter, 1966, p. 251.

[3]Neil Postman, "The Ecology of Learning," English Journal, 63:4, April. 1974, pp. 58-64.

[4]Lois Josephs Fowler, "The Schools, the Teacher, the English Classroom: Another Apocalypse," English Journal, 63:4, April, 1974, pp. 65-68.

[5]Neil Postman, "Alternative Education in the Seventies," The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog, (March 1971), p. 41.

[6]Mario D. Fantini in a speech at Vancouver, B.C., August 21, 1973.

[7]Stanley Elam, ed., The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education 1969-73 (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa, 1973), p. 175.

[8]Matters of Choice: A Ford Foundation Report on Alternative Schools (New York: The Ford Foundation, 1974), p. 35.

[9]Policies and Standards for the Approval of Optional Schools and Special Function Schools 1974-1975 (Chicago: North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 1974), p. 1.

[10]Vernon H. Smith, Alternative Schools: The Development of Options in Public Education, Lincoln: Professional Educators Publications, 1974, p. 75.